

ROBBERS

[Cont. from 49] old woman with brown eyes named Jeanette Federico.

"I still love you - it just ain't working out right now," Larry told Sharon on the morning of March 5, 1993, shortly before their second son was born. They'd talked all night, trying to work things out. Larry bent down to his little boy. "Take care of Mommy," he said. "Whatever you need, I'll be there." Santos lost her \$10,000 after Larry failed to appear for sentencing three weeks later, and she did not see Larry again until she watched the bank shootout on Laurel Canyon Boulevard in February.

Larry Phillips Jr. was now on the run, like his father before him, with Federico and her little girl, but he was finished for good with white-collar crime, with real-estate cons that never made you rich and forced you to hop from town to town as the local marks - and cops - smartened up. There was something bigger on Larry's mind, bigger than anything his dad ever did, something that required a few more smarts and a lot more balls, and could probably best be accomplished in California. The risks were higher, but the payoff could be enormous.

"Everything my son did, he did all the homework," says Larry Sr. "Any crime that you could put out there, he could show you a better way to do it, no matter what it was." Beyond real estate? "Well, of course," he says. "Probably all the way up to bank robbery."

OCT. 23, 1993, 10 P.M., SEVEN MONTHS after Larry Phillips abandoned Sharon Santos and their two young sons in Denver. A Glendale, Calif., police officer pulled over a speeding maroon T-Bird at the juncture of Pacific Street and the 134 freeway and asked the driver for identification. The man wouldn't say who he was. The officer patted the driver down, found a loaded Glock 9 mm semiautomatic pistol in his waistband and called for backup.

In the passenger seat, Emil Matasareanu leaned his bulky frame forward and put something under his seat. A second loaded Glock was discovered there. Later, at the Glendale police station, Larry Phillips Jr. produced a driver's license with the name Dennis Franks on it.

Collaring two muscled young men with Glocks on a road stop would have been a big enough score for the Glendale Police Department on any night. But the Glocks were window dressing compared with the arsenal that the police found on the back seat of the T-Bird and in its trunk. Belonging to Larry: a MAC-90 rifle, a Springfield .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol, holsters, two 200-channel programmable scanners, miscellaneous hairpieces, black ski masks, a stop-

watch, a gas mask, nine button-down shirts and nine pullover T-shirts, plus various pairs of shoes, jackets and pairs of glasses. Belonging to Emil: an assault rifle with folding stock, a fully loaded Colt semiauto pistol and two bullet-proof vests. Between them, Larry and Emil had enough ammunition for a prolonged firefight: 967 rounds of 9 mm, 357 rounds of .45 caliber and 1,649 rounds of 7.62 by 39 mm. Also discovered in the T-Bird were three different California license plates, a spray can of gray hair coloring and six smoke grenades.

This constituted what any police officer knows to be a classic bank-robbery kit.

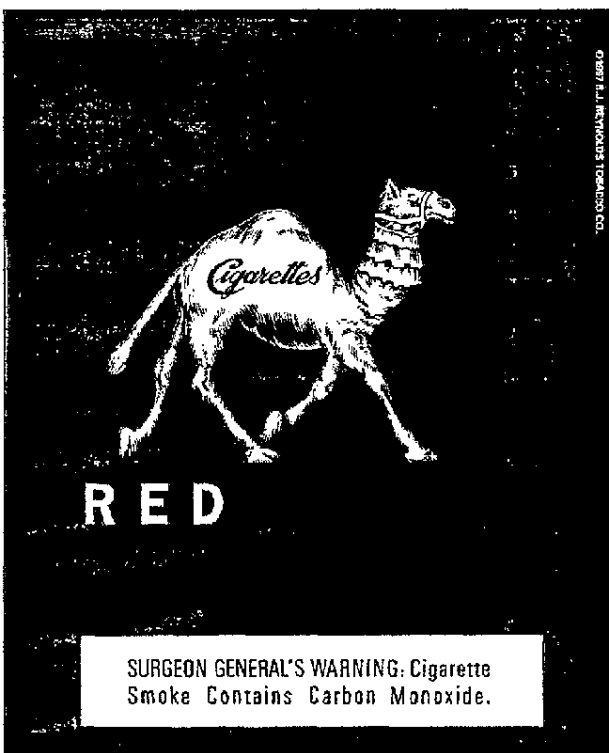
Charged with conspiracy and weapons violations, Larry and Emil appeared two weeks later at a preliminary hearing, where Larry's lawyer offered an explanation for the disguises in the car. The night that Larry and Emil were stopped was just a week before Halloween. As for the guns and vests, well, the pair was simply heading off to the Angeles National Forest, in the San Gabriel Mountains. People put on all sorts of get-ups for target practice there.

The district attorney dropped the conspiracy charge in a plea deal; bank-robbery kit or not, the thinking was that it would be difficult to prove precisely what or whom Larry and Emil were conspiring to rob. Larry pleaded no contest to a felony charge of false impersonation and a misdemeanor charge of carrying a concealed firearm, and served 66 days in jail. Emil pleaded guilty to two misdemeanors and served 47 days. At their sentencing, Superior Court Judge Thomas W. Stoever warned both men not to own or possess any weapons.

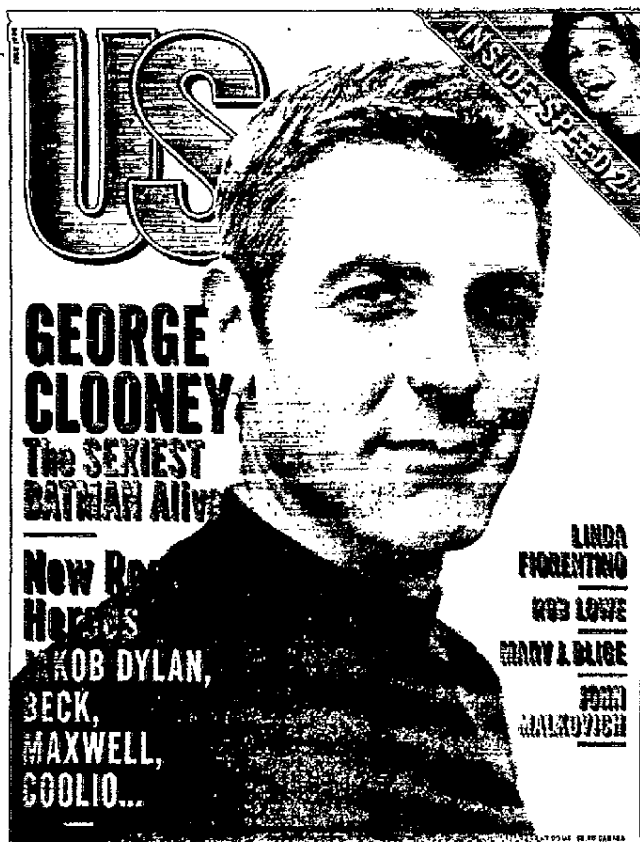
If they had been on the verge of their first bank heist, Larry and Emil put that plan on hold. Probation officers detected nothing unusual about the two men during the months they were on probation. Each reported on time and maintained stable addresses. Federico gave birth to a son. If there are people who know what prompted Larry, who had no history of violence, and Emil, who'd never committed a felony, to make the major leap to bank takeovers, they have kept mum.

On Jan. 28, 1994, Judge Stoever ordered the Glendale Police Department to return various items seized from the T-Bird to Emil and to Larry's mother, Dorothy, who died of lymphatic cancer a short while later. Except for his Glock, Larry got everything back - all the ammunition and disguises and scanners. All of Emil's gear, excluding his Glock and assault rifle, was returned to him. Larry and Emil were down to one assault rifle, but they would soon find replacements.

VALERIE'S VILLA, VALERIE AND Emil's main source of income, was heading for collapse by late 1994. The summer after Emil reclaimed his [Cont. on 64]



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ROBBE

[Cont. from 62] robbery paraphernalia, county officials accused him of slamming one of the home-care patients against a brick wall, a charge that Emil denied. The county stopped placing clients with Valerie and suggested to those already in the residence that they look elsewhere. Ordered by county officials not to have contact with clients, Emil, his wife and their young son moved out. Emil and his mother felt that the state was trying to destroy them with trumped-up charges. Their American dream had turned bad: After the Matasareanus had spent 14 years at a job most Americans would refuse, nobody would give them any respect.

Taking out a second mortgage on her North Sinaloa Avenue home, Valerie stepped up plans to renovate a building she owned in a run-down Pasadena neighborhood. Emil did much of the work himself, learning as he went from a book on construction. Valerie intended to open a private home-care facility there; Emil would use part of the space for his software business. Both Valerie and Emil sought guidance from mail-order tapes by the self-help guru Anthony Robbins, another infomercial character who promises fantastic results.

Valerie never liked Larry Phillips much, and after the gun incident, Emil's continuing relationship with Larry infuriated her as much as the way the state bureaucrats were treating her. For some reason, Larry wanted to isolate Emil from other friends and family members, Valerie thought. One day, Larry laughed at her for the kind of work she did, and Valerie lost her temper, telling him that at least she did "honest work." Another time, after Larry tried to sell her on one of his old specialties, a discounted trust deed, she banned him altogether from her house and became determined to turn her son against his shady friend.

"Give up your hobby!" she implored, referring to the guns. For a while, Emil listened; he told his mother that he had given away all his guns, and he swore to stay clear of Larry. "I'm very sorry," Valerie recalls Emil telling Larry over the phone. "You have your own life, and I have my own life. . . . We are not friends anymore." Emil enrolled in graduate-level psychology courses and even considered becoming a lawyer, but with Valerie's client base evaporating, money was tight. Emil was already behind on credit-card bills and student-loan payments. Valerie sympathized and gave her son \$50,000 from the house refinancing. He used part of the money to lease a Lincoln Continental so he could at least look like a successful businessman.

Then, in June 1995, Valerie ran into

changed. Emil allied himself squarely with Larry in the following months and did not speak to his mother or give her his address — a trick he probably picked up from his secretive friend.

"For the first time, Emil wasn't respectful to me," Valerie says. "When my son was talking to me, he was talking with Larry's voice, with Larry's accent. You felt you were not talking to Emil but you were talking to Larry."

TWO LARGE MEN WEARING BODY armor and carrying assault rifles robbed a Bank of America branch in Van Nuys, Calif., of \$755,000 on May 2, 1996. Similarly attired men with heavy weapons took \$794,000 from a Bank of America branch in Winnetka, Calif., 29 days later. The LAPD named the men, who were caught on videotape, the High Incident bandits. "Larry wanted a lot more out of life," says Sharon Santos, who is still in Denver, raising her boys. "And it didn't come quick enough." Valerie says she had no idea her son was a bank robber.

Larry and Emil appear to have operated on their own, using manuals to modify guns that they legally purchased out of state. Initially, authorities suspected the pair was affiliated with some sort of militia or supremacist group, but to date no evidence of that has surfaced. The robberies were well-planned and well-executed. The banks had been carefully cased; the robbers knew when large amounts of money would be on hand. They referred to stopwatches sewn onto their gloves, something the robbers in *Heat* did. "His intention I don't think was to be rich," Valerie says. "For Emil, money was never an issue. For him, [the robbery] was a message, the supreme way to beat the system."

Only briefly did Valerie and Emil break their estrangement — for a long talk just after last Christmas. "There's no hope for me anymore," Emil said. He seemed utterly defeated, nearly suicidal. Valerie suspected that Emil and Larry were up to no good. "Look here," she said, "whatever you do in this world, I don't question you. But one thing I want you to know: I cannot forgive you, even if you kill someone."

"I never did, Mom," Emil said. "And I'm not going to."

Larry Phillips, meanwhile, paid a surprise visit to his father in Denver last November, showing up in a Lincoln Town Car, his "traveling car." The two Larrys had not seen each other in almost four years, since Larry Jr. left town after the house-renting scam, though Larry Sr. had been checking the papers regularly to see if any sizable scams that went down involved his son. Larry Sr. worried about his boy during those

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